

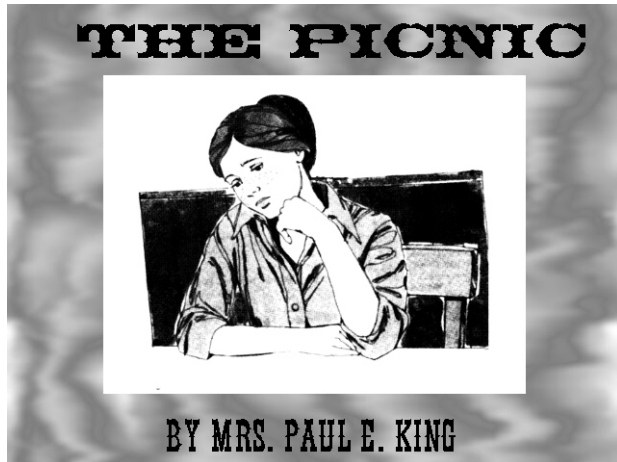
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THE PICNIC
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Laurel sat on the concrete step that led from the faded brick apartment building right out to the sidewalk, staring at the bright orange tennis shoes on her feet with sudden hatred and disdain. Whatever had caused her to dye them this loathsome color last week? she wondered suddenly, asking herself if she didn't have a brain anywhere inside her head. She consoled herself slightly with the thought that the shoes matched her bright orange skirt perfectly. In fact, they looked like they belonged to the skirt. But today, with a purple dress on . . . Ugh! She felt almost like a colored egg.

Taking one shoe off, she examined it carefully for rips or tears or holes. She wanted a new pair; desperately so. But her careful scrutiny revealed nothing but soundness and sturdiness in the shoes. Why hadn't she given any forethought to the fact that bright orange shoes just didn't "go" with blue, purple, yellow, red or coral dresses and skirts? she asked herself quickly.

Getting up from the step, she fled into her apartment complex and, rushing into the bedroom which she shared with her two sisters, June and Jean, she stood in front of the dresser mirror, holding the shoe before her, comparing the purple and bright orange color combinations carefully. A wave of nausea washed over her. She did look like a color-dyed egg. She did: purple dress (very pretty, it was), bright orange tennis shoes, blonde hair, blue eyes, rosy cheeks.

"Laurel. Laurel Murphy!" Her mother was paging her from the dining room.

"Coming," Laurel rushed from the bedroom and stood framed in the dining-living room archway, dangling the bright orange tennis shoe from her fingers.

"What are you doing, child? One shoe on; one off!" Mrs. Murphy exclaimed, sizing her sixteen-year-old up carefully.

"Oh, Mother, I look like a dyed egg -- I do. I do!" Laurel lamented, holding the shoe against her dress. "Can't I undye the shoes? They look ridiculous. Absolutely and positively, ridiculous! I'm ashamed to wear them."

"I'm afraid you have no other alternative, dear; your father's paycheck just won't stretch far enough for you to have another pair. Besides, Jean and June need shoes. You should have consulted me before dying them."

"But they looked so pretty with the orange skirt."

"After this, Laurel dear, and before you do anything, ask yourself the questions, 'How will this look with my red dress, or my blue dress? How will what I am about to do affect me later on?' The same principle applies to our words and our actions . . . 'How will this affect me?' and the one about whom I'm talking?"

"Well, I only wish I hadn't been so stupid as to dye these shoes. Everywhere I go people stop and look at me. At my feet! I'm almost like a glaring, obnoxious billboard. I tried to get the dye out by washing them in hot soapy water, but did it help? Not one bit."

"Forget about the shoes, Laurel, and concentrate on things that are good and lofty: things that will edify and build you up in God's graces. After all, it's the inner man or woman that is either beautiful or hateful. Keep your inner life sweet, pure and holy, and people won't think too much about your 'glaringly-bright' blunder, honey."

"You're so consoling, Mother; believe me, I'll think more than twice before I ever dye anything again. Now, what did you want? You called me. . . ."

"Connie called. She wanted to know if you, Jean and June would like to go to Flat Rock for a picnic. Her folks will be supervising everything and everybody. They'd like to have the van full of teenagers."

"I'd love to go!" Laurel exclaimed joyfully.

"Then get on the phone and tell her I gave you permission to go. I think it would be good for you and the girls. You've been rather cooped up here in the apartment and the exercise will be beneficial for you."

"What about food? One can't very well have a picnic without food, Mother. What are we to bring; did Connie say?"

"Nothing, honey. She said her mother and she had prepared 'gobs' of food -- your generation's word for an abundant supply. There'll be the usual fare of hot dogs, too, she said."

"I don't know what I'd have done without Connie," Laurel said thoughtfully, still dangling the shoe by its string. "I was almost petrified with fear when we moved from the country into the city. Everything looked so enormous and crowded and congested. For a long, long time I felt that the tall buildings were actually suffocating me. It was frightful."

"Claustrophobia," Mrs. Murphy replied, laughing softly.

"I hated the city -- actually hated it. I can't say yet that I love it, but Connie and her folks have helped to make it a bit more tolerable for me. Oh, Mom, I'll be so happy when we can move back to the country. Jean and June have no place to play except on the sidewalk, and so many of the boys and girls with whom they must play are rough, rowdy, coarse and loud."

"That may well be the reason the Lord had us move here, Laurel."

"Maybe so, but I'll sure be happy when we move back to the country. Mr. Kirkland said Dad's work here would only be temporary, didn't he?"

"He did, but things look different now, Laurel. Better not anticipate moving back too eagerly, dear. The company may well make this a permanent location for your father."

"Oh, Mother, no!"

"It looks very much that way, honey. But it's not a time to be fretting. The Lord has a purpose and a reason in it all. The Apostle Paul, in Philippians 4:11 says, 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.' And II Timothy 6:6 declares, 'But godliness with contentment is great gain.'"

Laurel toyed with the bright orange tennis shoe, her eyes misting over with tears at the apparent turn of events. "I'm going to pray harder than ever," she declared quickly.

"Pray unselfishly, dear. Even Jesus pleased not Himself, alone in the garden. He prayed, 'Not my will, but thine be done.'"

Laurel gulped. "I see what you mean; I guess mine has been selfish praying," she confessed quickly. "And I promise, I'll change it to, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.'"

"That's more like my girl. Now run along and get ready for the picnic; call the girls in; and keep in mind, Laurel, that the safest, sweetest and most delightful place to be is in the center of God's will."

By the time June and Jean had washed their face and hands and changed into clean dresses, the Brownlees' blue van pulled up in front of the

apartment building. With shouts of glee the twins rushed outside and climbed into the van. Laurel, dressed in her orange skirt and white blouse, paused long enough to kiss her mother good-bye before hurrying out to join the others.

Once inside the van, everybody was at ease by Connie's warm personality, ever-present smile and good-natured humor. By the time they reached Flat Rock Park Laurel felt as much a part of the group as if she had known them all of her natural life.

First there were games; then it was hiking.

"Everybody meet back here at 4:30," Mr. Brownlee said before taking the boys with him on a hiking trip. "Got it?" he asked as his wife and the girls started down one of the trails.

"4:30," Mrs. Brownlee parroted with a bit of lilting laughter in her voice.

"Wait till you see the falls!" Connie exclaimed close to Laurel's ear. "I love this park; Daddy brings us out here as often as he possibly can."

"I almost feel like I'm back home in the country," Laurel said softly. "Oh, Connie, someday I hope you'll be able to see where we lived. It's so beautiful back there, and so quiet and peaceful -- not at all like the noisy city."

"I like the city," Connie said quickly and defensively. "I've never known anything but city life. I visited an aunt of mine last summer (she lives in the country) and I couldn't sleep at all there; it was too quiet. Almost spooky-quiet! I could scarcely wait till I got home."

Laurel gasped, then she laughed. "Well, how about that!" she replied. "You couldn't sleep in the country and I'm having insomnia problems in the city--too, too noisy. I guess it's all a matter of what a person gets used to."

"Right you are, Laurel. And now we'd better hurry or we'll lose sight of Mother and the other girls."

"Connie. Connie." Mrs. Brownlee's voice rang sweetly through the woods.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Hurry back to the van and bring the first aid kit. I forgot it; we may need it for scratches. You know your way to the falls; we'll meet you there," Mrs. Brownlee said.

"Shall I go with you?" Laurel asked quickly.

"No need for that, Laurel; I'll not be long. I'll catch up with you in a little while."

"You're sure you won't need me."

"Positive. Furthermore, I want you to enjoy every single minute of this day. You needed this; the roses were leaving your cheeks."

"Oh, Connie how did you know I was homesick for the country?"

"It shows in your eyes and it's all too obvious in your conversation, Laurel dear."

"I guess I'd better be more careful what I say after this," Laurel replied.

"I've prayed for you," Connie said, hurrying back up the trail.

Shortly after her friend had gone, Laurel saw what looked like wild lady's slippers (or moccasin flowers) growing some distance off the hard, earthpacked trail. With excitement, she plunged into the woods, her heart hammering in rapturous enjoyment. Dropping to her knees, she caressed the velvety-smooth deep pink and red flowers, scarcely able to believe her eyes. What things of beauty were these orchid-like flowers, she thought, getting to her feet and walking farther and farther into the woods where she found them growing and thriving in great abundance. It was as though she had discovered a gold mine, so greatly was her heart thrilled.

With a sudden start she realized that she had wandered far off the beaten trail. Quickly she plunged through the woods toward where she was sure the trail must be and when, after much walking, she could see no familiar landmarks, she concluded that she was lost.

Now what? she thought, sitting down on a fallen tree to think. If only she knew what direction she was to go. But (without a doubt) she was one of the world's worst when it came to getting her bearings. The sun. Yes, the sun! She had always heard it said that one could easily get his bearings by looking at the sun. Quickly she raised her head. But the sun didn't tell her a thing, not a single, solitary thing; it just looked like it was a great stationary ball of fire in the very center of heaven.

Panic boiled up within her. Immediately she told her hammering heart to act normally and stop its frightful beating while she collected her thoughts and did what was most sensible to do: stay calm.

Dropping her head into her open palms, Laurel prayed. It was a simple prayer but a trusting prayer. Opening her eyes, she saw the bright orange tennis shoes. Why hadn't she thought of them sooner? she wondered, removing the shoes and hanging them as much in the open as possible before sitting down to wait for someone to find her. They were sure to miss her soon.

Sitting on the log, her bright orange tennis shoes dangling from a limb above her like a flag or banner demanding attention, she began to sing the old hymns she had learned as a very small child at home and in the church. How consoling they were now, she thought. She was not alone; she had a Friend who knew her exact location! The thought filled her heart with joy and gladness and hope.

One hour went by; then two, and three. Laurel strained her ears, listening for the sound of voices, but the only thing she heard was the twittering of the birds and the loud scolding of an apparently unhappy fat gray squirrel in a tree above her.

She called -- over and over, again and again -- but she received no answer. She had wandered too far off the well-traveled trail -- too deeply into the woods -- for anyone to hear her cries for help. It was a frightening thought -- a desolate feeling. In that instant she thought of the dozens of small children on their street -- in their block, even! -- whose cries were going unheeded and heedless as her calling for help was. A great lump popped up in her throat. For many of these children, there was no responding motherly answer; no warm, tender and comforting mother arms to enfold them and listen to their little (but real) tales of woe and cries of pain when they got hurt

or became ill: their mothers worked and, like Topsy, they "jus' growed up" -- by themselves.

A weight fastened itself to Laurel's heart, a heavy weight . . . for the unfortunate children who were parentless all day long and sometimes well into the night. What had she done to try to help them? She could have had a daily story-time for them, she realized suddenly, and told them all the wonderful stories in the Bible. why hadn't she invited any of them to church with her? She said she loved the Lord with all of her heart, soul, mind and strength, did she not? Then why no witnessing for Him?

The questions shook Laurel. She dropped to her knees in prayer, feeling condemned, wretched and miserable over her lack of love and concern for others. She had been too preoccupied with her selfish desire to move back to the country to notice the ripe harvest field right at her front door.

"O God!" she cried aloud in agony of soul, "give me another chance; I will let my light shine in our community. . . ."

She was still in prayer when, sometime later, she heard a loud shout of delight. "She's somewhere around here, Mr. Brownlee; I see her shoes."

It was Ben Hargiss, one of the boys the Brownlees were trying to win to the Lord.

Getting up from her knees, a new light shining in her eyes and her heart feeling like a flame of fire, Laurel said, "I'm over here, Ben; and in case you're wondering, I feel great. Great! It does one good to get lost sometimes; it gives him a bit of insight as to how a soul must feel without God."

Ben and Mr. Brownlee stepped beneath the tree where Laurel made her altar.

"What happened?" Connie's father asked quickly, sternness written in his eyes.

"I saw the moccasin flowers and left the trail in pursuit of them, not realizing that I was going deeper and deeper into the woods. Actually, I was

lost in wonder over having discovered that these rare flowers grow out here the same as they do in the woods back home."

"Thank God we found you!" Mr. Brownlee exclaimed. "Now come; we must be getting back to the van. My wife and Connie blame themselves for what happened. They'll be glad to see you again."

"And I'm starved!" Ben ejaculated.

"It's better late than never," Mr. Brownlee teased, leading the way back through the woods.

With peace in her heart, Laurel followed. Her eyes fell suddenly upon the bright orange tennis shoes on her feet and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. God may have wanted to use the brightly-dyed shoes as a door for witnessing, she thought; hadn't no less than half a dozen little girls told her (shyly) that they liked her shoes; that they thought they were pretty?

Pretty or not pretty, Laurel decided, she would keep her inner being beautiful and all-glorious with His presence. That was the thing the Lord looked for.

"Coming, Laurel?" Mr. Brownlee called over his shoulder.

"Coming," she answered, trying to speed up her pace to match that of her two rescuers and vowing to never, never -- under any circumstances -- dye her tennis shoes a bright orange again.